

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
STATE OF MONTANA

BRIAN SCHWEITZER
GOVERNOR



JOHN BOHLINGER
LT. GOVERNOR

July 10, 2006

The Honorable Mike Johanns
Secretary, US Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Dirk Kempthorne
Secretary, US Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington DC 20240

Dear Secretary Kempthorne and Secretary Johanns:

I write to you about bison management in Yellowstone National Park, and the brucellosis risk Park bison present to Montana. As you know, the Park is the last remaining reservoir of brucellosis in the nation.

The livestock industry in Montana has gone to great lengths and substantial costs to eradicate brucellosis from cattle. Idaho and Wyoming have done the same, but have recently lost their brucellosis-free status. Even as Wyoming and Idaho work to regain their status, no clear plan exists to prevent loss of status again in the future, and it may simply be a matter of time before Montana loses its status.

At the center of the issue are the longstanding, incongruent policies and activities of the Departments of Agriculture and Interior, with the ill effects falling upon states bordering the Park. Not only do we deal with the threat of brucellosis to our cattle industry, but we often receive a black eye when we are forced to take management actions to prevent potential transmission.

The National Park Service today insists on minimal management of bison in the Park, despite a long history of rigorous bison management activities within Park boundaries. The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service today insists on strict, state-wide application of its "two-herds-and-you're-out" brucellosis policy for the cattle industry in our three states, even though the risk of transmission affects only a very small geographic region, and despite the fact that USDA has historically allowed the use of smaller, regionalized management areas for disease control.

Past suggestions for bison management have included a test and slaughter program that would eradicate brucellosis in Park bison; a specially-managed hunt inside Park boundaries; creative fencing of Park boundaries. Each of these ideas alone presents problems, but we have yet to see any forward-looking ideas from the federal government.

Secretary Johanns
Secretary Kempthorne
Page Two
July 10, 2006

Hope for mild winters seems to be the only long range federal plan, along with expensive and ongoing hazing, capture, testing, and slaughter actions when bison reach Park boundaries. Meanwhile, cattle producers pray for no more brucellosis transmissions or disease status downgrade decisions from federal agencies. But hopes and prayers do not constitute a plan.

I have suggested two fundamental possibilities for bison management: creation of a special management area with quarantine-type standards for cattle near the Park, and negotiation of grazing leases to allow grazing of non-ruminants only until brucellosis is eradicated.

Unfortunately, Senator Conrad Burns has recently offered a rider to an Interior appropriations bill that attempts to take away one of those options. His language reads: "Attempts to shift the focus towards disease management, rather than eradication, or to create buffer zones around the park, should be rejected by the Department."

This rider puts Senator Burns squarely at odds with state veterinarians in the 19 western states. In March their Western States Livestock Health Association passed a resolution calling for reducing commingling through spatial and temporal separation, quarantine if commingling occurs, and consideration of additional sanctions on the three states if these recommendations are not implemented.

Secretaries Johanns and Kempthorne, I request that your agencies work to resolve inherent conflicts in their management approaches, and then work with Montana to design a realistic and effective long-term bison management program. At least three important goals could be accomplished: eventual elimination of the brucellosis reservoir in the Park, real protection of cattle producers from the threat of brucellosis, and more effective bison management.

I thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,


BRIAN SCHWEITZER
Governor

Cc: Senator Max Baucus
Senator Conrad Burns
Congressman Dennis Rehberg